

Brief of 7th International Water Conference

Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges

“Water is no one’s property and the provision of it is a fundamental human right”, with this notion, ActionAid Bangladesh, together with other country programmes in South Asia has been engaged in the discourse of ‘Water Commons’, since 2008-09. Water is at the heart of ensuring community resilience, and ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) has been strongly advocating for water justice and the rights of rivers in its policy advocacy and programmatic intervention.

International Water Conference is one of ActionAid Bangladesh’s flagship events and over the years, seven international water conferences on various thematic issues have been successfully organized. This annual conference goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to recognize the need for equity and ethics of water governance. In 2022 AAB organized the 7th International Water Conference titled “**Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges**” from 20-22 January 2022, as a continuation of the organization’s advocacy on pro-people water justice and people’s indigenous rights to the rivers.

Teesta River is the fourth largest transboundary river shared between India and Bangladesh, and it remains as one of the biggest water disputes since the finalization of the Ganges water treaty in 1996. Bangladesh has seen water levels in the Teesta drop dramatically in recent years during the dry season, due to the construction of dams and barrages by India and irrigation canals upstream violating the right of the river to flow. The core issue of water dispute lies during monsoon and lean season, with severe shortage of water in the dry season, impacting the rice (water-intensive crops) yields. Water and river governance, regional disputes and climate change are consecutively impacting people’s rights. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss and find solutions to these problems that are long term and pro-people, respecting the rights



Figure 1 Thematic Areas of the 7th International Conference

The Objective of the Conference:



Facilitate active conversation and dialogue among academics, policymakers, NGOs, donors, and implementors to inform and sensitize key stakeholders on the existing challenges around the Teesta river basin.



Solicit and disseminate innovative ideas that are critical to overcoming water-related challenges

The virtual conference was attended by national and international experts, academics, policy makers, activists, civil society, students and grassroots representatives.

The following stats represent the overall outreach of the conference

Total participants: 765+ (Zoom)

Total Reach by Digital Platform (Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter): 507312

Participants joined from 15 Countries across the globe.



Day 1: 20 January 2022, Thursday

Opening Ceremony

The first day of the conference started with the opening ceremony chaired by **Barrister Manzoor Hasan, OBE**, Chair of the Executive Board of ActionAid International Bangladesh Society. In his remarks, Barrister Hasan talked about the importance of working on water justice and the need for focusing on transboundary rivers especially the Teesta River for the succession of the conference.

The session started with opening remarks by **Ms. Farah Kabir**, Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh in which she shared a brief history of how ActionAid Bangladesh together with its South Asian country programmes started advocating on “Water Commons” over a decade ago. The movement got momentum in 2014, when AAB established a water museum- **Pani Jadughor**, in Kalapara upazila of Patuakhali district, to create awareness among the stakeholders, especially the policymakers and to create a strong basis for policy advocacy by communities. Since then, the museum has been functioning as an educational space. This initiative further led to the organization of international conferences on rivers and water since 2016.

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka presented the keynote on the theme of the conference- “Teesta River Basin: Overcoming the Challenges” by providing a brief background on the current state of the Teesta dispute, the structural interventions, associated geo-politics and the impact on human and eco-system.



“The International Water Conference is designed as a space for sharing ideas, encourage dialogues, foster trans-border activism, and build alliance”

-Farah Kabir, Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh.

The opening ceremony was followed by the launch of a [documentary](#) on the Teesta River illustrating the challenges of the communities in Bangladesh whose life is governed by the river. Additionally, a local *Bhawaiya* song depicting the culture of the communities in the north of Bangladesh was also played for the participants of the conference.

Speaker, Guest & Moderator for the Opening Ceremony	
Moderator	Farah Kabir Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh
Chair	Barrister Manzoor Hasan, OBE Chair of the Executive Board of ActionAid International Bangladesh Society, Executive Director, Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University
Keynote Presenter	Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed Professor, Department of International Relations University of Dhaka
Special Guest	Hasanul Haq Inu Member of Parliament of Bangladesh

Key Take Aways - Opening Ceremony

- Structural interventions are violating the **rights of people to the river** in both India and Bangladesh.
- These interventions not only pose a serious threat to the biodiversity and the livelihood of people, but it violates people's indigenous rights to the river.
- There is a potential **win-win situation** for Bangladesh, India, and China in terms of water sharing if Bangladesh can make efforts to dredge the rivers and enhance its water storage capacity even with funds from China.
- Rivers need to be conceptualized as "**prana (life), shakti (power), atman(spirit)**" to uphold their rights.
- For a river to be a river, four things are needed- **Water, Energy, Biodiversity and Sediment (WEBS)**.

Thematic Session 1: History, Morphology and Spatiotemporal Changes of Teesta and Surrounding Rivers

The inaugural session of the conference was followed by the thematic session on the **History, Morphology and Spatiotemporal Changes of Teesta and Surrounding Rivers**. The session was chaired by Dr. Ainun Nishat, Professor Emeritus, and Advisor of the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research, BRAC University. Dr. Nishat started the thematic session by laying background on the history and the temporal changes that followed in the Teesta River basin.



“The unilateral withdrawal of water by India from the Teesta River is unethical and not acceptable under Indian Law or the International Law”

-Dr. Ainun Nishat, Professor Emeritus, BRAC University.

The chair also discussed how the Teesta is no longer the river that we remember it as, and how people can now literally walk across it during the dry season. This issue is being recognized by the riverine people of India, as well as how structural interventions are posing a threat to biodiversity and people's livelihoods, including violations of their Indigenous rights to the river.

Speaking as a special guest, Mr. Hasanul Haq Enu urged to come to a solution to the Teesta water dispute and encouraged **people-led movements** like the **“Teesta Bachao, Nodi Bachao Andolon”** of Bangladesh. The discussion was further enriched by the distinguished panel members who highlighted the need for regional cooperation and strong leadership from both countries to resolve the dispute.

Speaker, Guest & Moderator for the Thematic Session 1	
Moderator	Farah Kabir Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh
Chair	Dr. Ainun Nishat Professor Emeritus, and Advisor of Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research, BRAC University
Discussant	Dr. Rohan D'Souza Professor Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University
	Ashok Swain Professor and Head, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University UNESCO Chair on International Water Cooperation.
	Iftekhar Iqbal Associate Professor, History and International Studies Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Key Take Aways - Thematic Session 1

- As the basin of Teesta is confined between India and Bangladesh, both countries should sit for **annual hydrological assessment** to resolve the water allocation problems of Teesta
- A **river-centric approach** is crucial, where communities will be at the heart of effective water resource management.
- An **integrated basin-wide approach** is needed to identify how the water should be managed and distributed within the two countries. It must be signed/accepted and developed by both countries.
- The design and establishment of dams and bridges should be done paying proper attention to **humans and the ecosystem**.
- **Environmental and social impacts assessments** of the structural interventions should be done properly
- As the whole hydrological process and water flow will be impacted by **climate change**, a whole-of-society approach needs to be taken to address the environmental and social aspects of climate change.

Day 2: 21 January 2022, Friday

Thematic Session 2: Structural interventions and regional geo-politics around Teesta River basin

Bangladesh has seen water levels in the Teesta drop dramatically in recent years especially during the dry season, due to structural interventions by India and irrigation canals upstream violating the right of the river to flow. Anthropogenic interventions which include bridge and barrage, bank stabilization, artificial levees, human settlement on side of the riverbank, intensive agriculture, sand mining and others are resulting in a negative impact, on the morphology of Teesta and surrounding rivers in Northern Bangladesh. In this context, thematic session 2 of the conference discussed the state of structural interventions and the geopolitics surrounding these activities. The session was chaired by Ambassador Shahidul Haque, Professorial Fellow, NSU, and former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

 *“In South Asia, river influences geopolitics, it should be looked as a means for a win-win situation for countries”*

- Ambassador Shahidul Haque, Professorial Fellow, NSU, and former Foreign Secretary of

Jayanta Basu, an Environment Documentation Expert, Director of Environment Governed Integrated Organization (EnGIO), Faculty, Calcutta University, presented a paper titled '**Geopolitics of River Teesta and need to pursue Nature based Negotiated Approach (NBNA)**'. Setting the tone of the session, he talked about the regional geopolitics and the unequal political power positioning in the region and how it influences the international, national, and local political relationships of the river. Through a high-level panel discussion, the session reiterated the need for holistic basin-wide approach factoring in climate change.

Speaker, Guest & Moderator for the Thematic Session 2	
Chair	Ambassador Shahidul Haque Professorial Fellow, NSU, Dhaka and Former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh
Presenter	Jayanta Basu Environment Documentation Expert Director of Environment Governed Integrated Organisation (EnGIO) Faculty, Calcutta University
Discussants	Dr. Atiq Rahman Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS)
	Syeda Rizwana Hasan Chief Executive, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA)
	Sharif Jamil General Secretary, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) Council Member of Waterkeeper Alliance
	Tuhin Wadud Professor, Begum Rokeya University, Director, Riverine People

Key Take Aways - Thematic Session 2

- Water should be considered a **strategic asset, not just a resource**.
- **Geopolitics** is critical to understand the context of political views and national interests.
- Water management must be **basin-wide management**- starting from the origin and down to the point where the river reaches the ocean.
- The entire river system of Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna should be considered holistically, and the **five riparian countries** should sit together to discuss the management of the resource as this is an integral part of the single river system
- Instead of a commercial approach, the **Nature-Based Negotiation Approach (NBNA)** should be taken for integrated basin-wide management.
- Considering the nature-based negotiation approach, the negotiation process should be **accountable and transparent** regarding water management and allocation.
- Apart from multi-country coordination, **nationwide** pro-people and nature-centric measures should be taken.
- **The Joint River commission** needs to be transparent- they need to share the information of their discussion to prevent mistrust between the two countries.
- **A communication channel or media strategy** for multi-country consultation should be developed

Thematic Session 3: Teesta River basin and its Ecosystem and Gender Implications

The people of the Teesta basin, both upstream and downstream, are going through major ecological, socio-economic, and cultural changes in their lives. The lives and livelihoods of riverine people are severely hampered due to the changes in river dynamics, structural interventions, consequent floods, and river erosion. Women become the worst sufferers as from the historical, cultural, and socio-economic perspectives, women share a strong and significant bonding with the river and are dependent on the river for their survival.

Speaker, Guest & Moderator for the Thematic Session 3	
Moderator/Chair	Farah Kabir Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh
Presenter	Zarin Yesmin Chaity Assistant Professor at Gender and Development Studies, Begum Rokeya University
Discussant	Ajaya Dixit Advisor, ISET-Nepal
	Sharminid Neelormi Professor, Jahangir Nagar University
	Ms. Minket Lepcha Storyteller, Filmmaker, Independent Researcher
	Ms. Shahnaz Parvin Project Coordinator, TROSA Project, Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK)
Grassroot Reflection	Zehrin Ahmed Communications Coordinator at Bangladesh Youth Environmental Initiative (BYEI). Chhaya Namchu Affiliated with West Bengal Lepcha Development board Mayalmith Lepcha General secretary of Affected citizens of Teesta (ACT)

Applying a gendered sensitive political ecology lens, this session explored women's experiences and perceptions on the Teesta River.

Ms. Zarin Yesmin Chaity, Assistant Professor of Gender and Development Studies, at Begum Rokeya University presented the keynote titled- *“Living with the Teesta River: women's livelihoods strategies in the changing climate of the Teesta River basin”*. Additionally, the session also screened a film- *“Voice of Teesta”* by filmmaker and independent researcher Minket Lepcha. The film traces the faint and unheard voices of locals from Sikkim to North Bengal who are affected by hydro-power developments on the river.



“Rivers should be considered as relation not resource, as rivers do not have boundaries”

-Ajaya Dixit, Advisor ISET Nepal

The session also highlighted the grassroots experience through the voices of grassroots women from Bangladesh, West Bengal, and Sikkim. The three speakers traced back the spiritual, cultural, and economic significance of Teesta in their lives and communities. The ground realities were further analysed by water and climate experts Mr. Ajaya Dixit and Ms. Sharminid Neelormi respectively.

Key Take Aways - Thematic Session 3

- Stories of struggles of women are the same in other parts of the world like Bangladesh. But **women's leadership** throughout is also prominent in solving the challenges.
- It is important to initiate a conversation among communities in Sikkim, Bangladesh, and West Bengal for cross-learning.
- The **agency of the communities** to ensure their right to river needs to be harnessed. Local communities can play a monitoring role to ensure compliance.
- **Young power** needs to be mobilized to take action and uphold the rights of the river.
- The **river modelling exercise** carried out for Ganges and Brahmaputra, should be explored for the river Teesta
- More investment should be made in **alternative livelihoods** of women to ensure their market access.
- More focus should be given to **ecosystem flow** and developing an understanding of it.

- **Multi-stakeholder dialogues** should be conducted so that policies are translated into action.

Speaker, Guest & Moderator for the Closing Ceremony	
Opening Remarks	Farah Kabir , Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh
Chair	Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed Professor Department of International Relations University of Dhaka
Special Guest	Dr. Eriberto Eulisse , Executive Director, The Global Network of Water Museums
Presenter	Rahima Sultana Kajal Executive Director; Association of Voluntary Actions for Society (AVAS), & Member of General Assembly ActionAid International Bangladesh Society
Discussant	Dr. Sara Ahmed Adjunct Professor, Centre for Water Research, IISER-Pune (Indian Institute for Science Education and Research) Founder-Director, the Living Waters Museum
	Dr. Manzoorul Kibria Member, General Assembly ActionAid International Bangladesh Society Professor Zoology Department University of Chittagong, Bangladesh
	Dr. Shashwata Bhattacharjee Head, Bangla Department Kaunia College
	Shamim Arfeen Executive Director at AOSED

Day 3: 22 January 2022, Saturday

Closing Ceremony

The closing ceremony of the 3-day conference investigated the discussions and key takeaways from the thematic sessions at the conference. Teesta river is a representation of the struggles being faced by river-centric communities across Bangladesh and India- with the once-mighty Teesta River now drying, the interpersonal relationships and thousand-year-old cherished cultures of communities and their livelihoods are now losing their course.

Ms. Rahima Sultana Kazal, Executive Director of AVAS presented the case of Kalapara **Pani Jadughor**, a successful model of **partnership with communities** in upholding the cultural landscape, livelihood, and heritage of the community. Dr. Eriberto Eulisse, Executive Director, of The Global Network of Water Museums, further highlighted the need and usefulness of water museums, not just as infrastructural development but as a repository of the cultural landscape. Talking about the water museum, Dr. Sara Ahmed, Adjunct Professor, at the Centre for Water Research, IISER-Pune shared India’s case of establishing a virtual water museum that serves as a collaborative partnership- between communities and their values. The session also shed light on people-led river conservation movements, a case of the southwest coastal zone of Bangladesh and the need for preserving the river-centric arts and cultures. In his closing remarks as chair, Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, called for ecosystem-centric conservation with people, nature, and culture at the heart of water sharing as well as reconceptualizing “geo-politics of cooperation” instead of “geo-politics of conflict”

Key Take Aways - Closing Ceremony:

- There is a lot of potential for research and collaboration between academics and organizations to work together in **river-centric research and activities**.
- **Living Museums** are innovative repositories to uphold cultural landscape, livelihood, and heritage and to build a **collaborative partnership**- between communities and their values.
- Building on the experience of the Kalapara Water Museum, a **Teesta River-centric Museum** can be established.
- **The inter-generational dialogues** are crucial to address the emergent problem of water in south Asia.
- The river-centered art and culture are being lost with the Teesta River drying up.
- We need to look at things from the aspect of civilizational, and water museums and even water resort-focusing tourism on water museums and river-centered cultures is something to look forward to.
- **Water Tourism** is also a potential area to work for both promoting river-centric activities and for employing local communities.

From the conversations at the 7th International Water Conference, ActionAid Bangladesh will take the following actions-



- **Documentation** of findings and recommendation from this conference
- **Policy Brief** formulation based on the outcome of the conference
- Two South-Asia wide **research scholarships** will be awarded to encourage young researchers in river and water centric research work.
- Two **fellowships** will be awarded to promote grassroots innovation and action on “water commons” and “river rights”
- Establishment of a **‘Virtual Water Museum’**-with a stronger focus on children and their art on how they view rivers
- Facilitation of **multi-stakeholder dialogues** to advance the agenda of water commons in South Asia.
- 8th International Water Conference which will take place in January 2023 on **“Youth engagement in sustainable river management”**

Summary Brief of 7th International Water Conference

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